

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

A Past That Doesn't Rest: Domination, Violence, and the "Question of Nationalities" in Ethiopia

Asafa Jalata. *The Oromo Movement and Imperial Politics: Culture and Ideology in Oromia and Ethiopia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020. 197 pp. References. Index. \$95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-7936-0337-1.

Elleni Centime Zeleke. *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020 [first published by Brill, 2019]. 281 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$28. ISBN: 978-1-64259-341-9.

Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe. *Laying the Past to Rest: The EPRDF and the Challenges of Ethiopian State-Building*. London: Hurst, 2019. 355 pp. Bibliography. Index. £55. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-78738-291-6.

Pierre Guidi. *Éduquer la nation en Éthiopie: École, État et identités dans le Wolaita (1941-1991)*. Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020. 350 pp. List of sources. Bibliography. €30. Paper. ISBN 978-2-7535-7681-0.

When Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe sent his last draft of *Laying the Past to Rest* to the London-based Hurst publishing house, he could not have imagined that less than two years later, in November 2020, Ethiopia would be embroiled in civil war again. Mulugeta Gebrehiwot himself had to go back to the bush, almost thirty years after he had left it at the end of the previous civil war in 1991. That year, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), of which he was a fighter and cadre, toppled the *Derg* regime, putting an end to seventeen years of military dictatorship. Between these two civil wars, Mulugeta supervised the post-war Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration program in the early 1990s, was a member of the 1994 Ethiopian Constituent Assembly, and served at different governmental positions under the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), before becoming a researcher in peace and conflict studies. As they went back to the bush in 2020–21, former TPLF commanders like Mulugeta rebuilt a guerrilla force



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that would hold its own against the federal government in the months to come. Until then, many of these men had hoped to grow old peacefully, living on retirement pensions or successful business ventures. But the past did not rest in contemporary Ethiopia.

To the contrary, the past—that is, history, memory, and their representations—is what is being fought about. The current conflict is more than a violent elite renewal inside a party-state system, as warring parties also argue, more importantly, on the shape of the state and the extent to which ethnicity should be a guiding principle for state reorganization. In the current conflict, both territorial claims and pretensions to have a greater role in Ethiopian history—or a competing history of their own—are anchored in historical pieces of argument. As Elleni Centime Zeleke puts it: “Ethiopian historiography [...] is meant to decide not only who the losers, winners, and heroes of the past are, but also the losers, winners and heroes of the future” (2020:39). This essay aims at stepping aside from this normative tendency, by analyzing major fault lines in contemporary Ethiopian politics through the review of four recent books.

In *Ethiopia in Theory*, Zeleke, a sociologist and political theorist teaching at Columbia University in New York, makes a rigorous reading of the intellectual debates in which student activists engaged in *Challenge*, one of the main journals of the Ethiopian student movement (ESM), published between 1960 and 1975. She offers a deeply anchored analysis of the intellectual productions of the time and the way social science shaped Ethiopian politics. In *Éduquer la Nation en Éthiopie*, Pierre Guidi proposes a very grounded vision of identity formation over a longer period by reconstructing, through interviews and archival work, the dynamics of schooling and education in Wolaita, Southern Ethiopia, since the 1920s. A former TPLF statesman turned independent researcher, Mulugeta tries to assess the achievements and failures of the TPLF throughout its twenty-seven years in power by interviewing past leaders and reading internal and personal archives, adding his viewpoint to the now rich historiographic debate on the party (Asrat 2015; Berhe 2009; Young 1997). Asafa Jalata, a leading Oromo intellectual figure and activist currently teaching sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, proposes a collection of articles republished in a single volume, *The Oromo Movement and Imperial Politics*. He provides an intellectual endeavor to construct *Oromumma*, the Oromo nationalism rooted in an indigenous Oromo epistemology.

By offering visions of contemporary Ethiopian history and politics rooted in archives, political debates, and personal experiences, these four books provide keys to help the reader understand the current turmoil in Ethiopia. This essay brings together questions of knowledge production, state formation, and ethnicity through the successive regimes. It first reviews how the idea of a united Ethiopian nation was crafted under the Empire and spread from the top of the state, through education. Second, it shows how the ESM articulated a critique of this idea of Ethiopia, redefining the polity through the “question of nationalities.” The third section reviews the ambivalence of

the Derg's policies toward the idea of a monolithic Ethiopian nation, and finally a fourth part assesses the federal remapping of Ethiopia under the TPLF. The conclusion asks whether the ideological and epistemological frameworks inherited from the ESM are still in place.

Ethiopian Nationalism: State, Language, Education

Pierre Guidi asserts that the idea of an Ethiopian “nation” is a concept that dates back to the fifteenth century (Guidi 2020:24). Ethnicity and nationalism refer to the same socio-political constructions, whose roots in Ethiopia are endogenous and should not be considered to represent any theory of “westernization.” Building on Partha Chatterjee’s critique of the sociological determinism of classical works on nationalism, Zeleke agrees with Guidi, reminding us that industrialization should not be taken as the main determining factor of ethnicity and nationalism (2020:118–19), and suggesting that Menelik must be understood not as a local emperor, but as the product of an international system of competing empires and nation states (2020:44). Scholarly work converges with activists’ understanding of the development of the Ethiopian state, an ensemble formed on the capitulation of agricultural surpluses in the Northern plateaus which extended and violently incorporated the southern, eastern, and western societies.

As monopolies of coercion, states also rest on symbolic violence, and education lies at the center of state building and state formation (Bourdieu 2012). Under Haile Selassie I, the Ethiopian empire pursued a strong assimilationist educational policy whereby pupils were required to learn Amharic at school. Guidi shows how Amharic writing ability was seen as inevitably linked with domination; it was the language of levies or, as Wolaita elders schooled in the 1960s put it, “the tongue that punishes you!” (Guidi 2020:61). Not only were schools authoritarian spaces where corporal punishment was ubiquitous, but nationhood was forcefully incorporated into the students, most notably through the teaching of Amharic. Speaking this language was among the competences needed for one to be considered a real Ethiopian citizen, while total assimilation meant the adoption of an Amhara name together with the Christian Orthodox faith (Guidi 2020:82).

Education was about creating a nation. To accomplish this task, curriculum writers needed to find significative Others who were seen as threats to the nation so that Ethiopians would have to stick together. Oromos and Muslims provided these Others (Guidi 2020:94), while Menelik and Haile Selassie but, interestingly, not Tewodros, were examples of Big Men in national(ist) historiography and curriculums in the 1950s and 1960s. Integrative myths were crafted to legitimize the belonging of peripheries to the nation, doubling the actual violence of the conquest with a symbolic one. Schooling was meant as a “tool to transform individuals to adapt them to a strictly restrictive definition of the nation, not a melting pot” (Guidi 2020:112).

For Asafa Jalata, imperial and colonial education has led to the destruction of an indigenous Oromo epistemology and prevented the constitution of an Oromo nationalist movement by destroying the very concepts through which Oromo elites could have framed their struggle—especially the institutions of *gadaa* and *sique* (2020:13–29). Imperial order has, however, been widely contested. Wolaita pupils had their own ways of adapting to assimilationist injunctions. English taught by missionaries who settled in the late 1920s provided an alternative to Amharic, an access to a kind of universalism that was not necessarily dominating. This counts among the reasons behind the success of the missionaries in the peripheries (Guidi 2020:130–32).

Mulugeta Gebrehiwot lists the revolts that mixed an ethno-nationalist claim with demands for social justice and a critique of feudal order throughout the twentieth century which increased during the 1960s: the 1942 *Woyyane* in Tigray (2019:27–28); the upsurge of the secessionist movement in Eritrea in the early 1960s (2019:28–29); the Bale Peasant Rebellion and the Gedeo and Gojjam revolts throughout the same decade (2019:29–31); and the failed coup attempts by “reformist” young elites in 1960 (2019:30–31; Guidi 2020:73–76). But the decisive contestation of this order, which linked the question of empire statehood with the question of the nation, came from the nascent higher education institutions.

The Ethiopian Student Movement: Theorizing and Arguing over the “Question of Nationalities”

The major critique of imperial nationalist politics was expressed by activist students, many of them abroad, during the 1960s. The Ethiopian Student Movement has drawn substantial scholarly works (Zewde 2010, 2014; Balsvik 2005), together with rich recollections by prominent members of the movement (Hailemichael 2020; Tefera 2014), but none paid as much attention to its intellectual productions as Zeleke does. She reads and comments on *Challenge* in the journal’s broader context, displaying how the students left their imprint on Ethiopian history by using social science concepts to frame political struggle (2020:111). Using (Marxist) social science concepts, ESM members provided a grid for reading Ethiopian history, one that still shapes contemporary power struggles. Their main imprint is certainly the “question of nationalities,” that is, the extent to which political struggles should be organized on the basis of nations and the autonomy these groups should have within the Ethiopian polity.

Drawing on Bahru Zewde’s works (Zewde 2010), Zeleke shows how arguments that led to the political salience of ethnicity in Ethiopian politics were also linked with internal factional struggles within the ESM (2020:93). If student activists mastered Marxist thought, their use of social science concepts was also instrumental; the questions they were asking were linked with their political projects, and how they thought they could secure power within evolving internal factional fights. Hence, their position on what was framed as the “question of nationalities” was not stable. *Challenge* hosted the main

debates surrounding this question, after Walleign Mekonnen and Tilahun Takele (the pen name for Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party's [EPRP] future leader Berhanemeskel Reda) produced two texts in 1969 and 1970 in other journals. Walleign and Tilahun advocated for the recognition of different cultures, histories, and traditions among the peoples of Ethiopia, enriching the already common depiction of Ethiopia as a feudal system with anti-colonial thoughts.

Between 1971 and 1973, *Challenge* writers argued over regionalism and the way the question of nationalities should be articulated with class struggle and revolutionary practice. Students disagreed on the Eritrean question, as the war had been raging for more than ten years in Ethiopia's northernmost province. In his 1969 piece, Walleign Mekonnen argued for the possibility of secession but opposed the Eritrean claim for independence, as it would be hijacked by the local bourgeoisie (Zelege 2020:124). Berhanemeskel Reda was in favor of the self-determination of nationalities, mainly because he considered the groups he was referring to as too large to be considered mere "tribes," while Hagos Gebreyesus, one of the oldest student activists (Bahru 2010:13, 22), with a deep interest in agrarian questions, considered that feudalism should remain the main contradiction leading the struggle (Zelege 2020:125). Andreas Eshete, who would decades later become a member of the 1994 Constitution Drafting Committee, Addis Ababa University's President, and a leading Ethiopian philosopher, took an Oromo pen name to defend the recognition of Ethiopia's plurality of nations and nationalities (Zelege 2020:91).

Such intellectual debate had consequences on the political organizations of the students. In 1971, these texts brought content to discussions within the Ethiopian Students Unions in North America and Europe. Both unions adopted a new stance on Eritrea, by supporting its quest for independence, while considering the national framework as legitimate to lead revolutionary struggle (Zelege 2020:92–93). Created in 1972, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) later adopted the same stance. The All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (*Me'ison*) recognized the "question of nationalities" a few years after Hagos Gebreyesus, one of its members, had rejected it. Meanwhile, Tigrayan and Oromo students organized on the basis of their ethnicity in the Tigray National Organization (created in September 1974; Berhe 2019:45) and the Oromo Liberation Front (created in 1974; Jalata 2020:5).

The Derg: Nationalism(s) in Practice

Asafa Jalata identifies the causes for the failure of the OLF and other Oromo nationalist organizations to implement and spread *Orommummaa* in the Oromo society (2020:35), namely, repression by the Ethiopian colonialist state and what he calls, in a rather essentialist way, "Oromo collaborators," who are to be blamed for the failure of *Oromummaa*. This is where works by Guidi and Zelege can add nuance to Asafa Jalata's readings, by showing that being schooled in the Ethiopian system cannot be equated with being a

“collaborator” (Jalata 2020:37), as it is among student groups that alternative readings of history and domination were crafted.

Under the slogan *Ityopia Tiqdem* (Ethiopia first!), the Derg was strongly nationalist and determined to preserve Ethiopia’s borders. Repression against student activists and ethno-national movements reached unprecedented levels, as is now well documented by scholarly work (Tadesse 1993, 1998). Against this background of violence and repression, Guidi offers subtle and welcome nuances on the socialist regime’s attempts toward ethno-national diversity. The Derg recognized Ethiopia’s linguistic diversity and produced school manuals in fifteen languages (Guidi 2020:203–5). The regime promoted education in both Amharic and local languages. Amharic was seen as integrative, in the sense that one could not fully exercise one’s rights as an Ethiopian citizen without speaking Amharic (Guidi 2020:222). Amharic lessons were task-oriented, designed to provide the students with the necessary tools to be independent. Concretely, it had the effect of offering them tools to understand domination—and to potentially divert or subvert it. Guidi concludes, “[Amharic and writing] were objects of aversion and suspicion, but mastering them was tantamount to appropriating the tools of domination, to carve out a place for oneself in the nation” (2020:325). Meanwhile, the massive literacy campaign that saw dozens of thousands of students sent to teach in the countryside (*zemecha*) intensified the relations between the center and the peripheries. The March 1975 land reform took part in the legitimization of the Derg by suppressing the class of oppressive landlords and by tasking the peasants with land redistribution. In that sense, the socialist regime did a lot to integrate peripheries in the Ethiopian polity, while repressing autonomist movements at the same time.

The TPLF and the Federal Solution

The question of nationalities was nurtured in revolutionary wars (Zelege 2020:61), and it gained concrete meaning as insurgencies were fighting, most notably in Tigray. The TPLF differed from the EPRP by adopting nationality as the basis for political mobilization and by preferring a rural guerrilla tactic to an urban-based one (Berhe 2019:81). Between 1979 and 1984–85, the TPLF built a real popular base, increasing its ranks from 5,800 in 1979 to 40,000 four years later (Berhe 2019:98) and centralizing aid provision between donors, the diaspora, and populations of liberated areas through the party-linked Relief Society of Tigray (REST).

Mulugeta Gebrehiwot attributes the TPLF’s success to the level of integrity and dedication of its fighters, emphasizing that the peasants generated an almost religious devotion (Berhe 2019:55), and the movement had the capacity to govern liberated territories (Berhe 2019:85), offering a high level of “stateness.” The TPLF used traditional institutions to carry out its land reform from below (Berhe 2019:71–72). It ensured a high level of accountability among its members and cadres, and a capacity to change its leadership regularly and peacefully that Mulugeta identifies as a TPLF idiosyncrasy.

However, although the TPLF chairmanship changed four times during the seventeen years of armed struggle (Berhe 2019:55), the party went through violent crises that ended with the exclusion of the defeated factions in 1977–1978 (Berhe 2019:63) and in 1985 (Berhe 2019:129–30). The latter saw the departure and exile of past chairman Aregawi Berhe, who later wrote a history of the TPLF that Mulugeta refutes to a great extent. Feuds last long; after three decades in exile, Aregawi came back to Ethiopia in 2018 and supported the war against his former comrades three years later. The acrimony and violence of debates in criticism and self-criticism sessions (*gimgema*; notably Berhe 2019:202–3) confirm the highly authoritarian political practices and the incapacity to compromise for this generation of politicians formed during the ESM. As Mulugeta puts it, quoting informants talking about the 2001 internal crisis, “[T]he whole mood was not about understanding each other and bridging differences, but rather to defeat each other” (Berhe 2019:200).

In 2001, tools of Marxist social science were employed again, when Meles Zenawi secured his grip on the party by ousting “leftists” and critics, after much interpersonal disagreement (Berhe 2019:219–21). Mulugeta, who left the central committee and the TPLF at this time, deplores the record of TPLF government in terms of human rights, acknowledging the persistence of torture, ill treatment of prisoners, and arbitrary detention (2019:190). He deplores the absence of a free press (2019:188) and the control of non-governmental organizations (2019:243). He describes how, after the 2005 electoral crisis, the EPRDF built its hegemony, reaching a claimed 700,000 members in the capital alone (2019:241). But he fails to link this practice of power with his depiction of the internal functioning of the party, which proved to be highly authoritarian. Criticizing Gebru Asrat, he concludes that the TPLF’s performance in government cannot be evaluated using the “criteria for liberal democratic organizations” (2019:271), insisting that a constitutional tradition limiting state power and assuring a democratic environment is needed before a ruling organization can be assessed on the criteria of democracy. But evaluating a ruling organization only through the criterion it had set for itself amounts to avoiding democratic accountability and leaves no good hope for the independence of the judiciary.

On the TPLF regime, Asafa Jalata goes so far as to consider the Tigray domination even more brutal than what the Amhara was formerly (2020:20). He substantiates his claim by asserting that, “In this era of globalization, the Tigrayan regime was advised, financed, and legitimized by the transnational capitalist class” (2020:61) and that the TPLF/EPRDF had the “blessing” of the IMF and the World Bank. Mulugeta’s memories nuance these observations, when he reminds us that the EPRDF had to “recalibrate its leftist orientation” when it reached power in 1991 (2019:145).

Mulugeta credits the TPLF/EPRDF with the main achievement of having provided an efficient institutional framework for solving ethno-national conflicts and ending “the dominance of one cultural and linguistic group

and instead creat[ing] a country in which the varying languages and cultures are equally entertained” (2019:244). He recognizes discrepancies between the text of the Constitution and the TPLF’s practice of power, condemning especially the “administrative nationalism” of intermediary elites that leads to the increased ethnicization of politics and greater antagonism in civil society (2019:253). Mulugeta captures a contradiction: in retrospect, if ethnic federalism did not lead to more democratic practices, it may have led to a less bellicose settlement of disputes, while reinforcing the expression of dissent in identity terms. However, the future proved worse than the trends he identified; Amhara nationalist discourses anchored in irredentist claims and a reified vision of an imperial history are now ubiquitous in public debate in the Amhara region.

The Violent End of a Paradigm?

For Zeleke, the ESM’s imprint on Ethiopian politics goes beyond the question of nationalities, as radical students left an epistemological framework for subsequent generations of activists. Opposition civil society activists in 2005 shared with 1970s students a faith in social science as the adequate mechanism for depicting reality and orienting political action (2020:15). Paralleling her reading of *Challenge* with the analysis of opposition programs and debates in the 2005 elections, she shows that it is not the framework of knowledge production that has changed, but the ideological content supported by politicians and activists mobilizing social science (2020:162). By 2005, the moderate liberalism of “human rights” discourses had replaced class struggle and the question of nationalities. Berhanu Nega and his Ethiopian Economists Association produced a liberal discourse in line with hegemonic World Bank policies (Zeleke 2020:156). In the 2000s, opponents of the EPRDF ignored “the historical context that the EPRDF regime was aiming to address, particularly the legacy of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, the student movement (...) and the concomitant civil war” (Zeleke 2020:149), but they shared a need to anchor their theories in social science works.

It is precisely this historical context and epistemological framework that the current Ethiopian Prime Minister and his Amhara nationalist allies seek to sweep aside, denying not only the question of nationalities, but also the materialist and positivist approach to politics that characterized the student movement. About a year before the beginning of the current war, Abiy Ahmed published a book in which he strongly accused the ESM of having “imported” a socialist ideology that did not fit with the country’s realities and encouraged Ethiopians to kill each other (2019:22). To materialism, Abiy prefers “trans-material values” (2019:148–49), which reflect both his tendency to present himself as a messiah, and his current allies’ invented narratives of a great, united imperial past. Under the cover of a de-politicized idea of tolerance and *vivre ensemble*, their uses of history neglect both the extent of national oppression that required assimilation in

imperial Ethiopia, and the endeavors of a generation to open another, more inclusive path.

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